



NEWS AT A GLANCE

■ The Israeli government is launching a ministerial committee to explore Israel-Diaspora relations. Jewish Agency for Israel Chairman Avraham Burg said he would present a blueprint plan to face the challenge of assimilation at the committee's first meeting.

■ Thousands of Ethiopian Jews converged on the Prime Minister's Office to decry what they called Israel's "discriminatory practices." The demonstration came after Israeli media reported that the country's blood banks routinely discard blood donated by Ethiopians for fear that the blood is contaminated with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. [Page 2]

■ Israel agreed to pay about \$400,000 to the family of a Moroccan waiter mistakenly killed by Israeli agents in 1973 in Lillehammer, Norway. The move brought to a close Norway's longstanding call for the Jewish state to compensate the family. [Page 4]

■ Germany observed its first national day of remembrance for victims of Nazi terror with subdued wreath-laying ceremonies during the weekend. But no ceremonies were organized by the federal government, drawing criticism from some Jewish leaders.

■ Israel was to begin receiving U.S. aid payments for 1996 as a result of a compromise reached between Congress and the Clinton administration. The aid comes after a four-month delay.

■ The condition of a 23-year-old Uzbek Jew, imprisoned in April after confessing to the murder of a criminal in the former Soviet republic of Uzbekistan, is worsening. His attorneys say the confession was obtained under duress and that he should be released and allowed to go to Israel. [Page 3]

■ Yigal Amir, the confessed assassin of Yitzhak Rabin, proposed to his police interrogators that they toast the death of the prime minister, one of the officers said in Tel Aviv District Court. The testimony came at the second day of the trial, where the 25-year-old Amir virtually took over his own defense. [Page 3]

Israeli foreign minister dampens expectations for Syria peace deal

By Cynthia Mann

NEW YORK (JTA) — Israeli Foreign Minister Ehud Barak is quashing notions that any breakthrough is near in the peace talks with Syria.

The latest round of talks between Israel and Syria is going slowly but evinces "moderate and measured advancement" at every meeting, said Barak at a briefing last Friday for members of the Jewish media.

Israeli-Syrian peace talks resumed Jan. 24 at Wye Plantation in eastern Maryland and are a prelude to a regional shuttle mission by U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher slated for early next month.

Barak also said Israel would be "ready for full withdrawal from South Lebanon" if Lebanon suppresses terrorist activity by the Islamic fundamentalist Hezbollah movement.

The foreign minister was looking ahead to direct negotiations between Israel and Lebanon, which are not anticipated until after a deal is reached with Syria.

He said Israeli withdrawal would be contingent on the Lebanese government's treating the South Lebanon Army "the same as other militias" that have been disarmed in recent years.

Soldiers should be allowed to join the defense forces of the Lebanese army or go home, he said.

The South Lebanon Army operates in the area of southern Lebanon where the Israel Defense Force maintains a 9-mile-wide security zone.

Meanwhile, Barak said Syrian President Hafez Assad "clearly wants peace with the [United States] and has decided he can't achieve it without peace with Israel."

But Assad "tries to do it his way, not Israel's way," the foreign minister added.

It will be clear in the coming weeks whether the two ways are "bridgeable," said Barak, who was on his first visit to the United States as foreign minister, a position he assumed after Prime Minister Shimon Peres formed a new government after the November assassination of Yitzhak Rabin.

Israel's "way," he said, is to emphasize early normalization; a peace that is comprehensive; and terrorism, water and security arrangements that reduce the incentive for both sides to launch a full-scale attack and make "a surprise attack against Israel practically impossible."

Only when these matters are addressed will Israel know "the depth of peace" Syria is seeking and the extent of withdrawal from the Golan Heights that is "commensurate" with that, Barak said.

For years, negotiations have gotten stuck on Syria's insistence that Israel spell out in advance its commitment to full withdrawal.

Asset at the ballot box

Barak said the current talks, which he termed "exploratory," reflected an effort to bypass this obstacle.

But the foreign minister added, "We're not going to have peace at any price. We're not going to have peace before a certain date."

"We want peace," he said, "but only if it can be achieved without violating our security and vital interests."

Prime Minister Shimon Peres is known to view an agreement with Syria as an asset at the ballot box in national elections that will take place later this year.

Recently, however, he has expressed a new caution about the complexity of military issues under discussion.

In recent weeks, Peres has said it would be impossible to reach an agreement before the elections unless the pace of the talks with Syria was accelerated.

On the same day of the Barak meeting, State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns cautioned against being too optimistic.

"We're just going to have to keep our nose to the grindstone," he said.

"We're going to have to work very hard and not build our expectations up too high" that the talks at the Wye Plantation "are going to produce immediately a peace agreement," he said.

"None of us should be under the misapprehension that somehow peace is just around the corner," Burns said. Meanwhile, Barak played down the importance of peacekeeping troops on the Golan.

"I don't think it is a crucial element" of any agreement, he said.

Such troops or "monitors" would not necessarily have to be Americans, he also said.

The Clinton administration has offered to send troops to participate in an international force on the Golan to monitor the implementation of a peace treaty if both Israel and Syria make such a request.

Although Barak noted that the United States "enjoys the trust and respect of both sides" in a way no other nation does, he also said, "If it's sensitive for the American public, it can be put aside."

Turning to the Palestinians, Barak said Israel is committed to living up to the peace agreement and expects Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to live up to it as well.

He said Israel expects an effective fight against terrorism and the cancellation of the parts of the Palestinian covenant calling for Israel's destruction.

"We don't describe it as a precondition, but we made it quite clear" to Arafat that Israel "cannot see ourselves entering" the permanent-status talks with these issues unresolved, he said.

The permanent-status talks are scheduled to begin in May.

The covenant abrogation has become the "litmus test" for Israelis on Palestinian "seriousness" toward the peace process, he said.

On terrorism, however, "we have no illusions," Barak said.

"We know he can't deliver a 100 percent, fool-proof" result, he said, adding, "We expect an effective, credible, aggressive, best effort," especially against the fundamentalist groups Islamic Jihad and Hamas.

The foreign minister said the fight against terrorism serves Arafat, too.

Barak said Israel was entering a historic "cross-roads" from a position of economic strength and military superiority.

In referring to the gap in living standards between Israel and its neighbors, Barak said, "We are living in a villa amidst the jungle" where "the laws of the jungle prevail."

"The real reason the Arabs came to the negotiating table is not an eruption of latent Zionism," Barak said. "It's a result of accepting the reality principle," the principle "that we can't be eliminated by the uses of force." He added, "it is this sense of reality that will keep them complying" with the agreements with Israel. □

Police use tear gas to disperse Ethiopian protesters in capital

By Michele Chabin

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Claiming that Israel is a racist country, thousands of Ethiopian immigrants converged on the Prime Minister's Office here this week to decry what they termed the nation's "discriminatory practices."

Leaders of Israel's Ethiopian community organized Sunday's demonstration after the Israeli daily Ma'ariv revealed that Magen David Adom, which operates the country's nationwide blood bank, routinely discards blood donated by Ethiopian olim out of fear that the blood is contaminated with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres voiced an apology for the events leading up to Sunday's demonstration.

"I don't think that what has happened was a matter of a policy, but of a mistake," he said, referring to the way Ethiopian blood donations were handled.

"I regret" the recent developments, he said, adding that Israel's Ethiopians "were hurt, they were insulted."

Israeli Health Minister Ephraim Sneh said last week that his ministry would continue its policy about blood donations from high-risk groups in order to protect public health.

According to the ministry, Ethiopians are 50 times more likely to be HIV carriers than other Israelis.

Of the 60,000 olim from Ethiopia — a country where AIDS is widespread — 520 have been identified as HIV positive, according to the ministry.

But Adiso Masala, the head of an Ethiopian immigrants organization, said last week that some 300 were infected with HIV.

During the sometimes violent demonstration, which lasted most of the day, many of the 10,000 demonstrators clashed with scores of Israeli police who were armed with riot gear.

While most of the crowd chanted slogans and waved banners from the sidelines, some threw stones and engaged in shoving matches with the police.

At least 50 Ethiopian Jews and police were injured in the demonstrations.

One Ethiopian was badly injured, as were two policemen, one of whom lost an eye.

Although rally organizers and police blamed each other for the escalation of tensions, many eyewitnesses were critical of the police department's decision to bring in water cannons and tear gas.

Several demonstrators, many of them elderly, as well as dozens of police officers, became ill when the wind changed direction and blew clouds of tear gas directly over them.

Many of the protesters asserted that the decision to discard Ethiopians' blood constitutes racism.

The protesters also charged that Israeli society discriminates against them in the areas of education and employment.

"There's a lot of racism here, and the blood issue is just one part of it," said Shira Eilen, an 18-year-old Jerusalemite.

"Israelis make us feel as if we're not Jewish. The blood thing was just the breaking point. Anger in our community has been building for a long time."

During Sunday's weekly Cabinet meeting, Prime Minister Shimon Peres invited a delegation of Ethiopian community leaders into his office to discuss their grievances.

Peres, Sneh and Absorption Minister Yair Tsaban promised to form a committee to examine the Ethiopians' demands. □

Soviet spy seeks early release

By Naomi Segal

JERUSALEM (JTA) — The attorney representing convicted Soviet spy Marcus Klingberg said he would continue efforts to secure his client's early release.

The Israeli High Court of Justice rejected a petition on the matter.

Lawyer Avigdor Feldman had cited his client's poor health as the reason for release.

Klingberg, 78, has served 13 years of a 20-year sentence.

He told the Israeli daily Ha'aretz last week that he would rather die than serve out his complete sentence.

The court said Klingberg could not be freed because he still presented a security threat to the state. □

Condition of Uzbek Jew held for murder worsens*By Heather Camlot*

NEW YORK (JTA) — A 23-year-old Tashkent Jew, imprisoned in April after confessing to the murder of a criminal in the former Soviet republic of Uzbekistan, was recently found incompetent to stand trial and ordered to a psychiatric hospital there.

Attorneys for Dimitrii Fattakhov maintain that the confession was obtained under duress and that their client is innocent.

The mental and physical health of Fattakhov, who had been brutally beaten while in jail, is deteriorating, said Helene Kenvin, the family's attorney in the United States.

He was transferred to a hospital prison ward in early January.

Kenvin said she spoke last week with Fattakhov's mother, who "was told by a doctor at the hospital that he has pneumonia."

The Union of Councils, a Washington-based advocacy group for Jews in the former Soviet Union, said Fattakhov would die if he is not released.

"We are concerned that he will not leave that place alive if something is not done soon," said Micah Naftalin, Union of Councils national director. "He must be allowed immediately to go to Israel, with his mother, for treatment."

Fattakhov and his two co-workers, Aleksei Smirnov and Oleg Gusev, were arrested in April for the killing of Pulat Khamdamov — a convicted gambler, embezzler and neighborhood drunk — in the mall where they worked.

The three young men confessed under brutal torture, Naftalin said.

Smirnov was released in the summer for lack of evidence.

Gusev, who was imprisoned for helping to dispose of the body, was released in December. Six eyewitnesses said he was on the other side of town during the murder.

Detailed the torture

Both men have since recanted their confessions and detailed the torture that they and Fattakhov underwent.

"Dimitrii, while being tortured, was put in a crucifixion position, beaten into unconsciousness and left like that over a two-day period," Kenvin said.

The trial was suspended last month after Fattakhov was found incompetent to stand trial, suffering from "situational psychosis." Kenvin said he did not recognize his mother or his lawyer.

The judge ordered him transferred to a state psychiatric hospital, but at the beginning of January, he was sent instead to the prison ward at a regular hospital with a police officer standing outside the door. His mother was prevented from visiting him.

"We have no smoking gun that it was anti-Semitic. His passport says that he's Tartar," Naftalin said, adding, "But it raises questions when only the Jew is kept, and it is clear that there is no evidence against him."

Kenvin said that if this case had come to light in the United States, it would have been thrown out immediately.

"There is no forensic evidence that the crime occurred at the mall," she said. "There's no murder weapon, no hair, no blood, no flesh, no fingerprints."

The American, German and Israeli embassies are appealing for Fattakhov's release, Naftalin said. Canada and Australia have also made inquiries.

In addition, members of Congress have voiced opposition to Fattakhov's violated human rights.

Fattakhov is the second Jew this year to face what may be false murder charges.

A 76-year-old Bukharan Jew in Tashkent was imprisoned for the murder of a 17-year-old tenant in his building.

Iosef Koenov was released from jail in February after serving almost five months. The case was officially closed after about 25,000 letters were sent to the Uzbek ambassador in Washington and to the prosecutor in Tashkent. □

Police official says assassin wanted to toast Rabin's death*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — As the murder trial of Yigal Amir resumed this week, a police investigator testified that Amir had asked for cake and wine to toast Yitzhak Rabin's death.

Appearing Sunday in Tel Aviv District Court, police investigator Moti Naftali said Amir had asked for the items to celebrate the news that Rabin was dead, Israel Radio reported.

Amir has already confessed to shooting Rabin at a Nov. 4 peace rally in Tel Aviv.

Naftali said Amir's demeanor at the time of the assassination was as "cold as a fish" and that he showed no signs of regret for his actions.

At the start of Sunday's hearing, one of Amir's lawyers, Mordechai Ofri, announced that he was stepping down from the case.

Ofri explained the move by saying that "outside elements" were interfering in his preparing a case for the defense.

Meanwhile, Judge Edmund Levy told Amir's other lawyer, Jonathan Ray Goldberg, that the line of defense he was building was "scandalous."

The judge added that if Goldberg continued to try to get the trial postponed, he might have to pay expenses for the trial, which began Jan. 23.

Goldberg had wanted to delay the trial in order to wait for the results of a state inquiry into security blunders that allowed the assassination to take place.

During Sunday's hearing, the prosecution presented the pistol used in the assassination as well as a video re-enactment of the slaying.

Yoram Rubin, a Rabin bodyguard who was wounded in the shooting, was scheduled to give evidence Monday. □

Hussein supports Palestinian state*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Jordan's King Hussein this week expressed support for an independent Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital.

Hussein made the comment while speaking to reporters Sunday at Amman Airport, where he saw off Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, who had been on a visit to Jordan.

During his stay in Jordan, Arafat met with members of the Palestine National Council, the parliament in exile, to discuss the Jan. 20 elections in which Arafat won nearly 90 percent of the vote to become the head of the Palestinian self-rule areas in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Jordan now has custodianship over Islamic holy sites in eastern Jerusalem.

Hussein has already said he would be willing to discuss that role once Israel and the Palestinians negotiate the final status of Jerusalem. Permanent-status talks are set to begin in May. □

Israel to compensate family of Moroccan killed by Mossad*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — Israel has agreed to compensate the family of a Moroccan waiter mistakenly killed by the Mossad, Israel's foreign intelligence service.

Bringing to an end what was known for 23 years as the "Lillehammer Episode," Israeli lawyer Amnon Goldenberg this week signed an agreement with the family of Ahmed Bouchiki, who was shot dead by Mossad agents in 1973 in Lillehammer, Norway.

Under the terms of the agreement, the two sides agreed to keep secret the exact amount of compensation Israel would make to Bouchiki's family.

But the Israeli daily Ha'aretz cited Norwegian officials who put the figure at some \$400,000 — a sum Israeli sources said "sounded reasonable." The money will be divided between Bouchiki's widow, Toril; their daughter; and Bouchiki's son from a previous marriage.

Toril Bouchiki, who was pregnant at the time, was with her husband the night he was killed.

The two had been walking home from a movie, when two Mossad agents opened fire, killing him.

The agents had mistaken Bouchiki for Hassan Salameh, a Palestinian terrorist believed to have masterminded the 1972 massacre of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics.

Salameh was killed in a 1979 car-bomb explosion in Lebanon.

Five Israeli agents were convicted and served short jail sentences in connection with Bouchiki's slaying.

But Israel never took responsibility for the attack.

Nonetheless, in the wake of growing pressure from members of Bouchiki's family as well as from the Norwegian government, Israel decided to address the issue.

While still not taking responsibility for the killing, Prime Minister Shimon Peres directed attorney Goldenberg to negotiate on Israel's behalf with the Bouchiki family in what he described as a "humanitarian gesture."

Israel's ambassador to Norway told the Israeli daily Ha'aretz that the Bouchiki family, in accepting the compensation, would not submit any further claims against Israel. □

Peres spars with IDF head about peace talks with Syria*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — As Israeli and Syrian peace negotiators continue their talks in eastern Maryland, Prime Minister Shimon Peres and the Israel Defense Force chief of staff expressed disagreement about the chances for reaching a peace agreement by the end of the year.

Speaking at Sunday's weekly Cabinet meeting, Lt. Gen. Amnon Shahak said the timetable for the Israeli-Syrian talks was too short for a peace treaty to be reached before elections were held later this year in the United States and Israel.

Israeli elections are scheduled for November, but there has been speculation that Peres may call for early elections if no progress is made on the Syrian track.

At the Cabinet session, Peres objected to Shahak's pessimistic assessment, stressing that some progress had been made at last week's talks in Maryland on the issue of normalizing Israeli-Syrian ties.

After meeting in late December and early January, Israeli and Syrian negotiating teams resumed their negotiations Jan. 24 at the Wye Plantation, a private conference center.

For the first time since the talks were abruptly

broken off last June, the teams included military experts from both sides.

During a weekend break before the talks were to resume this week, the two negotiating teams met separately with chief American mediator Dennis Ross.

U.S. Secretary of State Warren Christopher, who on Jan. 25 met with the two sides at Wye, is scheduled to travel to the Middle East on Feb. 5 for five days of shuttle diplomacy between Jerusalem and Damascus. □

HIAS helps U.S. government process refugee green cards*By Lori Silberman*

NEW YORK (JTA) — In one of the first partnerships created between a nongovernmental agency and the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society has helped process green card applications for 10,000 refugees.

The Refugee Adjustment Project, which began Nov. 13 and was to end this week, is the society's response to an INS request to provide much-needed space in the New York area to ease the backlog of refugees waiting for their green cards, which provide permanent residency in the United States.

"When the INS asked for help, we jumped," said Martin Wenick, HIAS executive vice president. "It would have taken the INS three years to process the thousands of refugees awaiting their green cards."

INS budgetary constraints were one of the causes for the backlog, Wenick said.

More than 250 people, mostly Jews from the former Soviet Union and Iran, have been processed daily at HIAS headquarters in New York, said Wenick.

Some non-Jewish refugees have been processed there as well.

To handle the large number of applicants, HIAS converted a large room normally used for board meetings and provided security and staff to assist the INS in preparing documents, translating information and taking photographs.

HIAS is one of 10 voluntary agencies that have cooperative agreements with the U.S. State Department to resettle refugees. □

Hamas to run in municipal elections*By Naomi Segal*

JERUSALEM (JTA) — A leader of the Islamic fundamentalist Hamas movement said this week that the group would participate in Palestinian municipal elections that are scheduled for the spring.

Hamas, which militantly opposes the Israeli-Palestinian accords, boycotted the Jan. 20 Palestinian Council and presidential elections.

But Hamas spokesman Mahmoud Zahar said the group would participate in the municipal elections because local officials would serve the daily needs of the residents of the self-rule areas.

He added that participation in the municipal voting would not signify Hamas' recognition of the Palestinian self-rule government or of the peace accords with Israel.

Meanwhile, 12 Hamas activists were released from Palestinian jails this week. Among those released was a leader of Izz a-Din al-Kassam, the military wing of Hamas.

The releases reportedly came in the wake of a meeting between officials of Hamas and the Palestinian Authority.

In a related development, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat approved the opening of a Hamas office in the Gaza Strip and the licensing of a pro-Hamas newspaper. □